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AUTHOR	Gilliam, Judith; Easterbrooks, Susan
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ABSTRACT

This digest uses a question-and-answer format to address some issues in the possible choice of a residential school for children who are deaf or hard of hearing. The importance of the residential school experience in the context of Deaf culture is addressed, as are other issues such as characteristics of students attending residential schools and how the residential school helps a deaf individual become a member of the Deaf culture. Benefits of residential school placement are identified, including providing the student with a sense of belonging, ability to group students homogeneously, and exposure to deaf adults. Limitations of residential placement are also noted, such as separation from family and the mainstream culture, and a less rigorous curriculum. (DB)

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THE COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN
1920 Association Drive • Reston, VA 20191-1589
1-800-328-0272
E-mail: ericec@cec.sped.org Internet: http://www.cec.sped.org/ericec.htm

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What is a residential school, and why is it so important to the Deaf culture?

A residential school for students who are deaf has a comprehensive academic, health, and socialization program including dormitory living equipped for students who are deaf. Most programs serve preschool ages through grade 12, although some schools also have parent-infant, vocational, and outreach services. Dormitories are divided according to age groups. All staff and personnel are expected to communicate with students fluently in all areas: academic, recreation, sports, leisure, field trips, and residential settings. Next to coming from a deaf family or a family with some fluent sign communication skills, many view residential life as the ideal opportunity for students who are deaf to become familiar with and enculturated into the Deaf community. In the dining room, for example, students get direct and firsthand experience of true dinner conversation, because the language of the Deaf community, American Sign Language (ASL), is used. In after-school activities students are on equal footing with their peers, and communication is not a barrier to social life because students do not have to depend on an interpreter, enabling them to express themselves freely to their peers. The residential school provides a great opportunity for socialization and is a great environment for developing self-worth.

If a culture is defined as heritage, language, and a set of customs and values shared by its members and transmitted from one generation to the next, then the Deaf community truly is a culture. Members of the Deaf culture are a group of individuals who have a common heritage (historical events, famous figures, art, literature, and scholarly organizations), a common language (American Sign Language), and a set of customs and values (cherishing Deaf children, expecting participation in cultural events, valuing the visual world, protecting one another)(Padden& Humphries, 1988). This heritage is passed on from one generation to the next via the residential school, where they learn such things as Deaf folklore and folklife (jokes, legends, games, riddles, etc.) from other children, Deaf teachers, and Deaf houseparents. Most schools for the deaf use some form of sign language (Padden & Humphries, 1988).

Who can attend a residential school?

According to the April 1996 issue of the *American Annals of the Deaf*, there were 78 residential schools for the deaf or deaf and blind in the United States with only four states not reporting a residential school. Most schools accept students based on degree of hearing loss, academic needs, parental choice, and other factors. Usually these schools have an established relationship with the child's local education agency. This issue of the *Annals* also reported that 21% of the population that was studied attended residential schools. Many schools accept children at about the age of three. For younger children, participation in a Parent/Infant program administered by the school provides much needed services until the child is ready to attend. Residential schools are an alternative to placements in local schools. Parents who are Deaf themselves often choose a school for the Deaf over local schools because of the opportunity for their child(ren) to participate in the life of the Deaf community and culture. Hearing parents of children who are deaf seem to have greater reluctance about sending their children because they do not want to be separated from them (Scheetz, 1993). Separation may cause feelings of guilt in the parents, confusion and homesickness in the child, and depression in both, but once the child has adjusted, he usually embraces the experience wholeheartedly. Houseparents and classroom teachers are often Deaf themselves, and a unique bond may develop between the Deaf child and other Deaf members of the school and community, where the child has access to role models who are Deaf.

How does one become a member of the Deaf culture?

The primary avenue by which a child with a hearing loss becomes a member of the Deaf culture is through the residential schools, but any child who has a hearing loss and uses sign language can become a member of the Deaf community. Students who are deaf and who attended mainstream schools must continue to prove their allegiance to the Deaf culture if they have chosen participation in adulthood (Reese, 1996).

What are the benefits of residential school placement?

Deaf students who are mainstreamed miss out on the feeling of belonging that individuals from the Deaf culture associate with their residential schools, and their experience is very different from those who attend residential school. Mainstreamed students often are singled out in many respects. Although they have access to interpreters, notetakers, and other special assistive devices, they still may be loners, especially in mainstream environments where there are few other students with hearing losses.

The residential school acts as a melting pot for the majority of the students. They are able to become personally involved with those of same educational or interest levels. In school, with an abundant number of students, they are able to be grouped homogeneously, thus facilitating learning. Residential schools also enhance competition among one another. The students are exposed to deaf adults with various types of careers. The residential school is the point of contact for the Deaf culture where deaf students can pass on the stories or history to be shared from one generation to another. Residential students are immersed in the genre of deafness and exchange the mannerisms, the differences, the values, the folklore of the Deaf culture.

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The majority of graduates from a residential school develop a strong bond with their alma mater. Going to homecoming games, for example, is a thrilling experience. It is like a home away from home. The alumnae also have a sentimental attachment to and value the well being of the school.

What are the limitations of placement at a residential school or membership in the Deaf culture?

This question is difficult to answer because the answer depend on the perspective of the person answering. Many students who have attended residential schools and who are members of the Deaf culture will admit to some regret over missing out on a closely knit family life but quickly add that the freedom of communication, sense of belonging, sports and other group events, and opportunities to experience success far outweigh the disadvantages. From the perspective of people who hear, there are concerns that the child who is deaf will have greater difficulty adjusting to adult life due to learned dependency and limited contact with the larger community. Further, the curriculum of the typical residential school tends to be less rigorous than that of other schools (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). Deaf culture members are almost unanimous in their response that the Deaf culture more than makes up the difference. In addition, because many families live at some distance from the school, parents tend not to participate in their child's education to a sufficient degree. The choice of residential placement must be made with the child's educational and emotional needs in mind, weighing the pros and cons carefully and with the best interests of the child as a guide.

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The Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf (CAID) is an organization of teachers who teach primarily in residential schools. The Conference of Educational Administrators Serving the Deaf (CEASD) is an organization of administrators who serve primarily in residential schools. CAID and CEASD publish the *American Annals of the Deaf* as well as newsletters. *The Broadcaster*, published by the National Association of the Deaf, provides a good glimpse into Deaf culture and residential life.

The CAID and CEASD presidents change routinely. A listing of the current presidents and their affiliations is found in the April issue each year of the *American Annals of the Deaf*. This issue also provides a listing of all residential schools in the United States and Canada and some in other locales. A contact number is given for each school.

Judith Gilliam, deaf since birth, is the supervising teacher of the lower school at the Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind in Talladega, Alabama and a former president of the Alabama Association of the Deaf.

Dr. Susan Easterbrooks is Associate Professor in the program in education of students who are deaf/hard of hearing at Georgia State University in Atlanta, GA.

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